

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS, Pt. 1

HABAKKUK 1

The Bible is divided into two major sections – OT & NT. The OT is divided for reference purposes into five sections – Law, History, Poetry, Major Prophets, and Minor Prophets.

The section referred to as Minor Prophets is composed of the writings of twelve men – prophets of Israel – who served, along with the Major Prophets, as the voice of God to a nation that continued throughout its history to disobey God's command to evangelize the world and to obey the Law as given through Moses.

These writers are referred to as Minor Prophets only because their writings are not as lengthy as the Major Prophets of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel.

One of those Minor Prophets was a man named Habakkuk. *It is a very short book in the latter part of the OT. It is a book that you probably have never read or from which you may never have heard a series of lessons or sermons.*

Yet this book is one of the most profound books in the OT and is strikingly applicable to the conditions of our nation and our world in the 21st century.

The time period for the writing of Habakkuk is uncertain, but some features of the book indicate an approximate time period. The setting appears to be just before 605 BC because the story as told in Habakkuk seems to indicate that Babylon has not yet attacked Judah. It was in the year 605 BC when Babylon came into full-fledged power as an empire in its own right by defeating the combined armies of Assyria and Egypt at the Battle of Carchemish.

When I first started studying Habakkuk, I did so in preparation for a single sermon in a series of sermons that dealt with the concept of focusing on Christ and keeping focused on the mission and the vision of the church, a series that will come later in the spring.

As I studied, I realized that there was much more in these three short chapters that merited a closer look, so I will be preaching from Habakkuk for the next few Sundays.

I encourage you to read it in its entirety, which is easy to do in one sitting since it is only three chapters.

Habakkuk's name meant "embrace." It could refer to the love that God has for his people – how he embraces them with tender, loving arms to care for them until He calls them home.

Or it could refer to a man clinging or holding fast to divine wisdom – holding on to God for all that he is worth.

This second image is the one most prevalent here in Habakkuk, Chapter 1.

Habakkuk's embrace is actually a wrestling hold. He is determined to wrestle with God until he gets answers to his questions.

With words and with a boldness like that found nowhere else in Scripture, Habakkuk questions God and demands an answer.

And God does answer, though it was not the answer that Habakkuk expected. After making his case to God, he waited patiently for God to respond.

The book of Habakkuk is the record of the things that Habakkuk saw as God revealed the vision to him. As we seek God's face concerning the mission of DaySpring Church, we must listen for Him to speak, then see the vision that He has set before us.

If you read the paper or watch the news or check the headlines online, then you are well aware of the state of our nation and of our world. It is not a pretty picture.

It doesn't take much to convince us that the world we live in is a messed up place. We are overwhelmed by wars and violence, terrorism and fear, political infighting and governments that seem to be out of control.

Add on top of that are all of the natural disasters that we hear reported – seemingly on a daily basis.

If the polar ice cap doesn't melt and drown us, then a rogue asteroid is destined to destroy the earth.

It's easy to get discouraged and just throw our hands up in despair.

There are serious and difficult questions that the world, including Christians, asks when these things happen:

- Why is the world so evil?
- Why do bad things happen to good people?
- What is God planning to do about it and when is He planning to do it?

The book of Habakkuk deals with these very questions.

When you first begin reading the book, there is a short, one-verse introduction...

Hab. 1:1 The burden which the prophet Habakkuk saw.

Then you move on to verse 2, and BAM!, you find yourself caught up in an argument between the man of God and God himself.

Actually, there is only one person arguing. God is listening and is prepared to answer.

In **verses 2-4**, we hear the burden of Habakkuk. Apparently, he has been praying and fasting and seeking God's answer for a long time. So long that he finally seems to lose control and make extreme demands on God to answer.

Verses 3 & 4 are a litany of items – a laundry list of evil – that needs God's immediate attention. When you read them, you realize that Habakkuk is repeating himself, but it is simply an indication of the frustration he is experiencing.

In summary, his world seems to be overwhelmed by

- Violence
- Sin
- Perversity
- Declining social standards and mores
- Lawsuits and litigation
- A legal system that is impotent to prevent crime
- Court system that does not or cannot issue justice

Habakkuk is full of anxiety because it seems that not only is evil and violence and injustice on the rise; these things seem to have permeated the very systems of government and courts and law enforcement that are designed to prevent them.

His words in verse two indicate that Habakkuk understood that the country did not have a political or economic or social problem – it had a spiritual problem – the same issue we face here in our own country.

He cries out, “How long will I cry and you not hear? How long will this violence go on and you not save?” Habakkuk realized that the only hope for the nation was a supernatural touch from the hand of God.

The word “violence” plays a very prominent part in Habakkuk’s prayer. He uses the term six times in the first two chapters of his book. The word is used about 68 times in the whole Bible.

Gen. 6:11 *Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence. 13 And God said to Noah, “I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence through them. Behold, I will destroy them with the earth.”*

I know we like to think that God loves everyone in the world, but the Bible makes it clear that that is not the case.

Psalms 11:5 *The LORD tests the righteous, but his soul hates the wicked and the one who loves violence.*

It is interesting that the Hebrew word for “violence” is *hamas*.

If you listen to the news at all, you know that that is also the name of the Palestinian group that is committed to the overthrow of Israel.

The Bible is also very clear how God will deal with those who use violence against Israel.

Obadiah 1:10 *For violence against your brother Jacob, shame shall cover you, and you shall be cut off forever.*

Joel 3:19 *Egypt shall be a desolation, and Edom a desolate wilderness, because of violence against the people of Judah, for they have shed innocent blood in their land.*

Yet the violence and the injustice that had Habakkuk so upset were coming from inside of Israel. It was his own people – the chosen people of God – who were acting this way.

Earlier, Isaiah had prophesied...

Isaiah 60:18 *Violence shall no longer be heard in your land, neither wasting nor destruction within your borders; but you shall call your walls Salvation, and your gates Praise.*

Now Habakkuk was ready for God to fulfill this prophecy and to answer his prayers.

Then, beginning in **verse 5**, God answers.

Now that God has committed to answer his prayers, you might sense Habakkuk breathing a sigh of relief as he prepares to hear the message from God. He will listen carefully because, as a prophet, he will be the one who carries the message to the people.

But if Habakkuk had any preconceived ideas of how the message would be worded, he was in for the shock of his life.

God tells Habakkuk and the nation of Israel: Keep watching because I have a plan for dealing with the sin and iniquity and injustice of this nation. When you see my answer, it is going to astound you. You will not believe it even when you see it happen.

Moses warned you earlier of my intentions, but you ignored it. If you remember he wrote...

Deut. 32:21 They have made me jealous with what is no god; they have provoked me to anger with their idols. So I will make them jealous with those who are no people; I will provoke them to anger with a foolish nation.

Habakkuk is probably getting even more anxious right about now. Instead of hearing a message of salvation and deliverance, he gets a message of judgment and destruction.

The Lord's answer to violence in this case is violence. It is the principle of lex talionis, the legal term for "an eye for an eye," the law of retribution. The Lord is sovereign over Babylon as well as over Israel. He has chosen Babylon to achieve His purpose of judging and disciplining his chosen people, Israel.

God continues: My answer to this problem of iniquity and sin within the nation will come from outside of the nation. So look – keep your eyes open. It will come without warning from a direction you did not expect. It is such a dramatic thing, that even when I tell you, you won't believe it.

This is simply the way of man. We will not believe that God's judgment will fall until it has fallen. This true throughout the Scripture:

- The Flood
- Sodom and Gomorrah
- The deaths of Ahab & Jezebel

Jer. 5:12 They've spread lies about GOD. They've said, "There's nothing to him. Nothing bad will happen to us, neither famine nor war will come our way. 13 The prophets are all windbags. They speak nothing but nonsense." (Msg)

Matt. 23:37 O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!

Paul used verse 5 as the basis of his message in the synagogue in Antioch, warning the Jews there of the consequences of their hard-heartedness.

In verse 6, God continues: Habakkuk, here is how I am going to solve the iniquity and idolatry of Israel. I am already at work raising up the Chaldeans – the Babylonians – who will march over the land and destroy it entirely.

I have chosen as my instrument of righteous judgment the most wicked, the most vile, the most prideful people that have ever populated the earth.

They will sweep over the land of Israel like a hot, burning eastern wind straight off of the desert and will carry the people off into captivity like grains of sand.

In **verses 7-11**, God goes on to detail what will happen during the fulfillment of the vision. He relates how terrible these people are and the methods they will use to destroy and punish Israel.

The point is that, not only will it be swift and horrible, but it will be unstoppable.

If we were to put this prophecy in modern-day terminology, it would be as if I stood in the pulpit and announced that God had said that the USA would be destroyed in the very near future by al Qaeda or the Taliban or radical Islam.

At this point, I believe Habakkuk had become a bit apopleptic. He probably felt his heart skip and his breathing shorten due to the unexpectedness of such a pronouncement. This was nothing like what he had expected.

This pronouncement from God ran counter to everything he and all of Israel believed. Habakkuk's questions might have brought to light a national crisis. But God's pronouncement created a theological crisis.

It was the same response that Israel had to the teachings of Jesus. They had believed a particular way for so long, that even when God himself told them they were wrong, they refused to accept it because it contradicted all that they had previously been taught and had believed.

Yet God is not finished. He wants Habakkuk and all of Israel to know that the Babylonians are His chosen instrument. They will carry out the destruction and perform the acts of evil, but it will be as a result of God's sovereign design.

Verse 11 speaks to the fact that the Babylonians will, by their own volition, come down hard on Israel. They have no consciousness that Jehovah God has already chosen them as His instrument of judgment and discipline.

So they will not come on Judah as disciplinarians, but as willful conquerors filled with pride at their own success – so prideful of their achievements that they see themselves as gods.

God has chosen them and appointed them to this task, yet He says they will be held accountable and judged as guilty for this decision that they are making.

Carl E. Armerdinger:

Evil and calamity do not exist independent of the sovereign rule and redemptive purpose of God, but this truth is apprehended only by faith in God as he reveals himself...The sovereignty of God does not eliminate human accountability...

(The character of the Babylonians) was rooted in a self-sufficiency that acknowledged no superior authority and no dependency, which was tantamount to self-deification.

By their very character, the Babylonians had usurped the place of God. Their source for justice and honor came, not from God – the standard bearer of all that is righteous – but from within themselves.

The Babylonians were guilty because their strength became their god. There was no respect for accountability to a higher authority than self and no recognition of the need for repentance, "even while violating the most fundamental order of created life."

There is in this pronouncement a statement that God will not tolerate idolatry from anyone – either from His own people or their enemies.

Furthermore, verse 11 is a statement of hope, because God is letting Israel know that this time of discipline, while it may be hard, will not be forever. There is the seed of deliverance planted in His words.

This is a hard saying – for Habakkuk, for the nation of Israel, and probably even a hard saying for most of us today. Our reaction to such a hard message is very much the same as that of Habakkuk. We struggle to understand things that we have not been taught, so we argue our point and, when we still can't understand, we simply choose to ignore it.

But Habakkuk realized that God had called him to be a prophet to the nation, and he could not ignore it.

Like most of us, Habakkuk was looking for a simple answer that would speak of the love and the care of God for His people. He wanted an answer that fit his preconceived idea of how God is supposed to act based on all those things he had been taught before.

This was a lesson that he did not know if he could take and certainly one that he would have a difficult time relating to the people. Because of that, he pitched into round two of his wrestling match with God.

Habakkuk's second argument is recorded in verses 12-17 of chapter one continuing into verse one of chapter two.

Though firm in his faith and trust in the Lord Jehovah, as expressed in verse 12, Habakkuk cannot make the correlation between the holiness of God and His use of such treacherous, devouring, and unrighteous means to accomplish His ends.

The lesson that Habakkuk struggled to understand was the same one that most of us struggle with when we deal with the sovereignty of God over our lives and our salvation. He could not see how such tyranny and evil could be attributable directly to God's initiative in judgment without condoning it at the same time.

In verse 12, Habakkuk speaks back to God: Jehovah, my God, you are righteous and holy and eternal. You are the same God who delivered your people from slavery in Egypt. You have covenanted with your people and "we will not die."

Our expectation from you is that your chastening will be redemptive, not destructive. And we prayed for a restoration of justice and fairness, not judgment and rejection.

These Babylonians are an evil people. Certainly you have not chosen such people to be your instrument of divine judgment. How can you, who cannot even look on evil, allow these people to be the instruments of our hands?

They will visit us with the same pleasure that the fisherman who, with his seine net, destroys all of the fish in the river and takes pleasure in his accomplishment to the point that his net becomes his object of worship.

God is teaching a lesson here: to reject his authority through the Law is to yield oneself to the even harsher punishment of godless enemies. To reject His salvation is to reject oneself to the companionship of Satan in his dominion separated from God and heaven.

“Man may determine by his conduct how he will encounter God’s sovereignty, but he cannot escape it.” (Armendinger)

Then, in chapter two verse one, Habakkuk seems to come to his senses and realizes that he has been speaking to God rashly – or better, irrationally.

So he determined to stand still upon his watch – to be faithful to his calling as a prophet to the nation – and to wait for an answer – to see what God would speak within his heart – and to decide how he would respond to the reproof he expects from God.

Habakkuk needed to hear an answer to his questions, so he went to a place that would be like a high watchtower – a place away from the bustling crowds and the noise and distractions of the world.

His goal was to free his mind from the cares and struggles of the affairs of men until God gave him an answer.

“Set me upon a tower” is a reference to a place of siege and a walled-in, narrow place. This is very much the way the Habakkuk felt – besieged by the evil of the world and especially of these his people. He was in a tight spot and he determined to plant his feet firmly in place and not move until God answered his complaint.

Habakkuk probably did not literally go up into a watchtower, nor did he climb to the top of some mountain to get closer to God. He stayed at his post as prophet and delved into the written word of God – the Law and the writings of Moses were the scriptures for his time – and meditated on God’s word – and prayed for God to answer. Other than that, he just waited on God to answer.

And God did answer once again. We will look at that answer more closely next week.

For now, there are several lessons to learn from this story.

1. God is sovereign in the affairs of men and He uses whom He chooses, when He chooses, and how He chooses to carry out His perfect will.
2. The justice of God is certain and sure and while it may seem that He is silent, He is working out His plan and those who are lost in sin will be judged and disciplined according to His righteous standard.
3. There is in every message of judgment the seed of salvation. God made it clear in this prophetic statement that His wrath is not forever – that there is always hope for salvation for those willing to repent and turn from sin to Him.

Hebrews 2:3 *How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?*

Hebrews 4:7 *Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.*

How will you respond to the call of God on your heart today?